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THE ANCIENT SECRET

By Eando Binder

A S HIS rocket ship arrowed down to the planet Pluto, Lieutenant Jon Jarl of the Space Police felt relaxed and at ease. For once he had an easy and pleasant assignment.

"Delivering the mail!" he said to himself. "What could be softer than that? I had rough going the past month, chasing down crooks and finding loat explorers. But this is a snap."

The regular mail ship had developed engine trouble and was docked for repairs back on Jupiter. They had appealed to the Space Police to carry through the mail. Headquarters had given Jon the Pluto run.

Jon Inded on Pluto at the lonely outpost Where just a few dozen men ran a space weather station. They were perhaps the loneliest men in the solar system, almost four billion miles from Earth. Mail to them was far more precious than gold. News from home, from wives and swetchearts and families.

"Mail call!" Jon called "out cheerily-and was nearly trampled down in the rush. "Easy, men! One at a time, please. I'll hand out the mail as fast as I can."

Rager hands grasped their letters and ripped them open avidly. But one hand paused, holding a letter, without opening it. The man receiving the letter stood rooted in surprise.

"What's the matter?" queried Jon. "Something wrong with it?"

"Look at it!" gasped the man who was a bearded young scientist. "It's not for me."

Jon stared. "But isn't that your name-Roderick Carlton?"

"Yes, but look at how old and yellowed the envelope is," returned Cariton, "And look at the postmark date."

Jon looked and gasped. "1975? But jumping Jupiter! This is the year 2261!"

"And that letter was addressed to a Roderick Carlton who was my great-grandfather eight times removed !" added the young man. "Where has this letter been all that time?"

Jon shrugged, with a wry grin. "You know the Post Office? Every once in a while, a letter gets lost and kicks around for years before it finally reaches the right party. But this breaks all records—a letter lost in the shuffle for almost three centuries! Well, open the letter and see who wrote what to your ancestor way back in the twentieth century,"

Carlton opened the fragile envelope carefully. It almost fell apart with age. The paper inside was firmer and better preserved. Reading it, the young man frowned, and then handed it over to Jon with a bewildered face.

"Gibberish!" he said. "Just a scribble of nonsense!"

Jon stared at the sheet. It was half covered with writing, but all in a jumble of words that made no sense whatsoever. There were no clear sentences, and it was unsigned at the end.

"Drivel," agreed Jon. "But there must have been some purpose to writing and mailing it. I just wonder--could this be a cryptogram, or coded message of some sort? Was someone trying to get across a secret message?"

"Buried treasure or something!" echoed Garlton, suddenly excited. "Maybe it was that." He turned. "Hey, Jonasl You're our cryptogram expert. See if you can decipher thes coded message.

Jonas Krotkin, code expert, came forward, a small dark man with a high domed forehead and shrewd eyes. He squinted for a long moment at the letter and shook his head. "Cant make it out. How old is this mesare?"

Carlton handed him the envelope. Krotkin started, and let our a whistle of astonishmen. "Postmarked 1975 Let me take the letter 10 my room to study it. It may take me hours to break a code way back from 1975. Give me in hours. Don't disturb me as I'll have to concentrate."

Jon stayed on Pluto. He was allowed an overnight stay and rest before returning to duty in space. Six hours later he was with Carlton as he knocked on Krotkin's doce. There was no answer,

"Must be concentrating hard," Carlton said "Well, we'll just walk in and see if he got anywhere."

The room was empty! Puzzled, Carlton and Jon went through the huge outpost, but found no sign of Krotkin anywhere. "Out to the space hangar !" Jon snapped. "If one of your ships is missing--!"

A ship was missing! Jon turned to Carlton. "Three's only one snawer to this. Krotkin did desipter the message and found it led to some kind of trensure. But instead of turning it over to you, the rightful owner, he skipped to er the treasure himself !"

"The low-down crook !" swore Carlton. "Get him Ligutenant! Track him down !"

Jon was already running to his own ship. "Right, Carlton," he yelled back. "I'll get him."

But Jon's job was not casy. Krotkin had suit of prinks, hown, had which way had he goes into wide open space. Jon circled in under werze, Finanty his Ultra-orited detector picket up the faint trail of rocket amole left you know the finant trail of rocket amole laft was paped, following the simoke by instrument. Lackity, Krotkin was not an experimedation of the simole and there to break the trail.

It was near Satura that Jon overhauled the slower ship. Krotkin evidently spotted him coming, by radar, for he suddenly swung off to land at Rhea, moon of Satura. Would the fol make a wild run for it into nearby woodland, filed with savage Rhean monsters? Jon had his doubte.

Jon landed nearby and started searching for jostprints around the other hip, to see which way Krotkin had run. He kneeled at marks in the ground. But Krotkin had not run away, He was hidden in the hold of the ship. He crept out behind Jon and simed a ray-gun at the uniformed figure.

But Joe auddenly whirled and shot the gun out of his hand, grinning. "Did you think you fealed me, Krotkin'I knew you were too instiligent to run like an idot into the wilds. Likew you were hiding in the ship and I only pretended to kneel so I could watch for you out of the correr of my eys. I arrest you in the name of the law, for attempted theft of Cattor's treasure. What is it and where is it?

"You'll never know!" snarled Krotkin. With an evil grin, he ripped the purloined ancient letter to shreds. "Now Carlton can't decipher the code, But I memorized the directions. You can put me in jail for a few years, but when I get out, I'll still get the space treasure for myself! Figure a way out of that if you can, Cooper!"

On the way back to earth, with Krotkin his prisoner, Jon muttered helplessly to himself. Krotkin had cleverly won after all. The secret of the treasure was locked in his mind alone. He alone would raps. All Jon could joil him for was larceny. Nobody could force Krotkin to eive up his stolen secret.

Suddenty, Jon as tup, "Wait a minute 1997, Way, but was the year space tareat fort ascreed, one Barch. The first rescelet tip to be mon and back excerction 1993. And that furt space flight carried homorary mult only. Thus a start of the start of the start of the start start. That's why the letter was gliberth. Rederick Carbon of 1993 merely acredied up of thing down, and maled the inter back to orghing the start of the start back of the cardinal to the most and back, purely as a delthing down, and maled the inter back to orghing the start of the start back of the cardinal to the start of the start back of the cardinal to the start of the start back of the cardinal to the start of the start back of the cardinal to the start of the start back of the cardinal to the start of the start back of the cardinal to the start of the start back of the cardinal to the start of the start back of the start back of the start of the start back of the start back of the start of the start back of the start of the start back of the start back of the start of the start back of the start of the start back of the st

KROTKIN turned pale as Jon anstched "What you wanted was not he letter, but this stomp. Only a few rare copies exist today, centuries after it was printed. And this stamp is catalogued at one hundred thousand dollars!" That's the 'treasure' you instantly apotted when Cariton handed you the letter."

Snarling in rage, Krotkin tried to grab the envelope and stamp away, but Jon's hard fist hurled him into a corner.

"You almost got away with it, Krotkin. But you were dumb to keep pretending it was a space treasure. You see, space wan't really explored fully until 1976 and later. How could a letter of 1975 tell of treasure on other worlds -hefere anybody ever reached them?"

THE END

Don't miss the exciting exploits of JON JARL in each issue of CAPTAIN MARVEL ADVENTURES!



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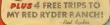












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